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What Makes King David Special

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Since earliest childhood, I've known some basic facts about the Biblical King David. He slew the Philistine Giant Goliath. He ran from King Saul and then became king. He sinned with Bathsheba (I didn't completely understand the details until I got a bit older). He wrote the Psalms that we sing in church.

But compared with the rest of Scripture, my knowledge of the details of David's life was lacking. Until the COVID-19 pandemic.

My church's young adults ministry did a multiyear, in-depth study of David's life and writings as recorded in I and II Samuel, I Chronicles, and Psalms.

In an era of working from home and saving hours each week by not commuting, I had unique opportunity to delve deep into the subject. I discovered that, next to Jesus Christ, no one is mentioned as much in Scripture as King David. David is mentioned in 935 Biblical verses, compared to Jesus' 941. And despite the Bible containing multiples of most names, there is only one man in Scripture bearing the name of David.

Held in honor by both Jews and Christians, David was also very human. With glaring shortcomings and failures along with amazing successes and victories.

David's story certainly involves the miraculous. How unlikely it would be for a shepherd boy from an unknown family to become a world-renowned king in ancient times! But the miracles of David's life involve less of the interruption of the laws of nature compared with Moses, Elijah or Jesus. Davidic miracles are more miracles of being in the right place at the right time or making full use of an opportunity. Which is a lot more relatable to most of us.

King David Playing the Harp (1622) by Gerard van Honthorst

According to the four temperaments theory, David was probably a mixture of the outgoing sanguine and the introspective melancholy.

His Psalms cover every human emotion - from exuberant joy to dark depression to anxiety to anger and everything in between.

My study of David greatly benefited from pairing the Psalms he wrote with certain experiences in his life.

For instance, Psalm 51 is a timeless statement of repentance, penned in the aftermath of David's sin with Bathsheba. Psalms 57 and 142 were written decades earlier when David fled from King Saul and was hiding in the Cave of Adullam. The tragic rebellion of David's son Absalom is referenced in Psalm 3.

(Check out this **chart** of all the Psalms associated with incidents in David's life).

Essentially, the Psalms are like David's journal. And viewed that way, perhaps no one's diary has impacted more people through the ages. David's story is a story of relationships. In almost every incident we remember, he is referenced alongside another person. David and Goliath. David and Jonathan. David and Abigail. David and Bathsheba. David and Nathan. David and Absalom. And each story gives us in-depth character sketches in which we can learn from these men and women as much as we learn from David himself.

In many ways, the course of David's life - for good and bad - was set in his youth, when he was anointed king and then defeated Goliath. David's anointing would anger King Saul, prompting a decade of danger and hiding for David.

David's first marriage, to Michal, as a reward for defeating Goliath, would be a rocky one. This in turn presaged future relationships and ultimately the turmoil and tragedy in David's family life.

It is a common, though overly simplistic, belief that God displays judgment in the Old Testament and grace in the New. But the story of David turns that common paradigm on its head. Suddenly, the skeptic changes tone, from questioning the severity of God's judgments to doubting how God could consider a man as flawed as David to be a man after God's own heart (I Samuel 13:14).

Even as a devout believer, I must say it is a challenging discrepancy. But the more I ponder it, the more I see this discrepancy at work in my life and in the lives of those around me. Perhaps David's life can teach us how great God's grace is, while not negating the consequences we face for our actions.

"David's fall should put those who haven't fallen on guard and save from despair those who have fallen," aptly said the 5th Century St. Augustine.

Was David even a true historical figure? The debate among scholars was largely settled in 1993, when the Tel Dan Stele was discovered, which references the family line of King David. Image from Wikimedia Commons

I've learned that if David had never lived, the world would be a very different place today.

The nation of Israel would probably not exist, since David brought the Jewish people to national cohesion and prominence as never before or after. The Bible would not have the personal applications so many draw from it, since it was David and his son Solomon who wrote much of the poetical books of Scripture. And much of our modern notions of biography and statecraft come from David's story. Even our belief in the rule of law is in not a small way rooted in the life of David, considering David's countercultural (for the time) insistence to respect the office of his rival King Saul, since Saul was God's anointed. David's kindness to Saul's lame grandson Mephibosheth gives the world a new way of ruling. In a society in which exterminating a vanquished political rival's descendants was par for the course, David set a new and more humane precedent.

Historically, David was roughly a contemporary of Homer, author of *The Illiad* and *The Odyssey*. It was an era of heroes some 3,000 years ago, and David could be considered the ultimate hero of the time. Most importantly, from the Christian standpoint at least, if David had not lived, Jesus Christ would not have come. The Gospel writers make it clear again and again that Jesus' claim is a Davidic one (Matthew 1:1, Luke 1:32, Luke 2:4, etc.)

If you haven't taken time to study David's life and writings in context, I'd encourage you to do so. Make it an inductive study. Don't only focus on the history, but on the practical lessons for us today. You'll find it a life-changing experience. You'll better understand God, human nature and even yourself.

My study during COVID was verse-by-verse through the Books of Samuel and related Psalms – almost like another grad degree.
But if you don't have that much time to devote to your Davidic study, here are 10 passages not to miss:

- David anointed king (I Samuel 16). Notice how the Lord chose the youngest, least likely candidate for the kingship. "For the Lord does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (I Samuel 16:7).

- David and Goliath (I Samuel 17). This is a timeless story most of us grew up hearing. Notice how God prepared David practically for the task at hand through his youthful shepherding. It is also interesting how much geographic and historical details are provided.

- David spares King Saul (I Samuel 26). David's respect for leaders and his willingness to wait on the Lord are so evident here.

- God's promise to establish an eternal kingdom through David (II Samuel 7). Ponder this chapter in light of Jewish claims to the Holy Land and Christian views of Christ's claim to the Divine throne.

- David's kindness to Mephibosheth (II Samuel 9).

- David and Bathsheba (II Samuel 11-12). Note what many consider God's "severe mercy." David is not judged as he deserves for his sin. But he certainly doesn't get by with it.

- The death of David's son Absalom (II Samuel 18). It's been said that David was an absent father, and this was largely due to the poor example he himself had set with his own sins. David's victory over Absalom is considered his most bitter victory. To this day, a memorial pillar stands in the Kidron Valley near Jerusalem.

- David's song of deliverance and last words (II Samuel 22-23). The latter chapter also includes a review of some of David's mighty men, a reminder that David's greatness did not occur alone.

- Psalm 23, the timeless Shepherd Psalm. Read it anew in light of David's life, and in accordance with the theory that David may have written it toward the end of his life journey.

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